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Louis XIV of France 123

Personal memo from  
JOSHUA LEDERBERG

Prof Wheelis

10/6/99

1 Louis XIV.

Dear Prof Wheelis

I am enjoying SIPRI/cow 18.

Do you know anything of  
this allusion to Louis XIV?

Sincerely,

John Lederberg

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Imperial forces at the Battle of Denain combined to end  
the war. The treaties of Utrecht, Rastatt, and Baden,  
signed in 1713-14, cost France its hegemony but left it

territorially intact. It retained its recent conquests in  
Flanders and on the Rhine, which were so much in the  
order of things that neither later defeats nor revolutions  
would cause it to lose them.

Louis XIV died on September 1, 1715, at the age of 77.  
His body was borne, amid the jeers of the populace, to  
the Saint-Denis basilica.

His heir, the last son of the Duc de Bourgogne, was a  
five-year-old child who was not expected to live. Louis  
had distrusted his nephew, the Duc d'Orléans, and wanted  
to leave actual power in the hands of the Duc du Maine,  
his son by Madame de Montespan. In attempting to ac-  
complish this, he had drawn up a will that was to help  
destroy the monarchy. The Parlement of Paris, convened  
to nullify the will after his death, rediscovered a political  
power that it used to prevent all reforms during the en-  
suing reigns, thus making the Revolution inevitable.

**Evaluation.** During his lifetime, Louis was flattered  
ceaselessly by his subjects, while foreign journals com-  
pared him to a bloodthirsty tiger. Voltaire portrayed his  
grandeur in his *Age of Louis XIV*. The Duc de Saint-Si-  
mon, a member of his court whose *Mémoires* show equal  
proportions of literary genius and insincerity, dealt with  
him quite harshly, without denying his admiration for  
him. Later judgments of Louis varied according to the  
author's political views.

Louis XIV was the foremost example of the monarchy  
that brought France to its pinnacle. He has been accused  
of having dug the grave of that monarchy, particularly  
through his religious policy, his last will, and his isolation  
of the court from the people. These mistakes could have  
been corrected. His irremediable error was to have con-  
centrated all the machinery of the state in his own person,  
thus making of the monarchy a burden beyond human  
strength.

His reign, compared by Voltaire to that of the Roman  
emperor Augustus, had both its strong and its weak  
points. Despite his victories and conquests, France lost  
her primacy under him. Yet the brilliance of his reign  
made up for his military policies. The aristocracy of  
Europe adopted the language and customs of the France  
where the Sun King had shone, although resentments  
ingered for a long time.

The King identified with his office to such an extent that  
it is difficult to find the individual. His harshness and  
courage, despotism and stoicism, prodigious pride and  
passion for order, megalomania and religion, intolerance  
and love of beauty can be understood only as a function  
of the exigencies of governing. He wanted France to be  
powerful, prosperous, and magnificent but was not overly  
concerned with the well-being of the French people. His  
armies committed atrocities, but the horrors of today  
have eclipsed them, and under his reign one did not see  
whole nations reduced to slavery, mass deportations, and  
genocide. When an Italian chemist offered him the first  
bacteriological weapon, he gave him a pension on con-  
dition that he never divulge his invention.

Louis was sometimes a tyrant, but in the words of Vol-  
taire: "His name can never be pronounced without re-  
spect and without summoning the image of an eternally  
memorable age."

**BIBLIOGRAPHY.** LOUIS XIV, *Mémoires* (Eng. trans., *Mem-  
oirs of Lewis the Fourteenth, Written by Himself and Ad-  
dressed to His Son*, 2 vol., 1806), is very important for an  
understanding of the psychology of Louis XIV. There are  
many French editions of this work. Contemporary accounts  
include: the DUCHESS D'ORLEANS (Madame Palatine), *Cor-  
respondance complète*, 2 vol. (1857); *Mémoires* of the DUC  
DE SAINT-SIMON; the *Journal* of DANGEAU; reports of the Ve-  
netian ambassadors and of the marquis de Saint Maurice,  
ambassador from Savoy; and EZECHIEL SPANHEIM, *Relation  
de la cour de France en 1690* (1704; Eng. trans., *Account of  
the Court of France*, 1900). VOLTAIRE, *La Siècle de Louis  
XIV*, 2 vol. (1751; Eng. trans., *The Age of Louis XIV*), an  
admirably written and well-documented study, remains an  
important source. JACQUES ROUJON, *Louis XIV* (1943), is  
a very objective and complete work. Two of the best books  
written on this period in the past century are PHILIPPE ER-  
LANGER, *Louis XIV* (1965; Eng. trans., 1970); and JOHN B.  
WOLF, *Louis XIV* (1968).

Louis XIV  
and the  
French  
monarchy

(P.Er.)